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Prepare now to squash millennium bug

E-BIZ

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Many entrepreneurs aren't all that concerned about the Year 2000 issue. They probably think, as I did, that it involves old mainframe computers, programs written in ancient languages such as COBOL, and big business.

But earlier this year, I checked my accounting system and discovered that it won't work after Dec. 31, 1999. At that point, the realization hit that the Y2K bug is something that entrepreneurs should be concerned about.

How real will the problem be? It is difficult to judge in face of two extreme points of view. There's what you could call the "California attitude" — that Y2K is a full-blown crisis and we should all load up on food and run to the hills, because society is about to come crashing down on our heads.

An "ostrich view" holds that the millennium bug is simply a bunch of hype — nothing is going to go wrong and we should all find something else to worry about.

Reality probably sits somewhere between these two extremes, and no one will really know the true impact until it happens.

Still, while big businesses and governments have been spending billions of dollars on the problem, most experts agree that small business has been largely ignoring it. Yet my experience suggests that you really need to take the time to determine whether your small business is at risk.

First, you should assess any financial, inventory, contact management, production or other computer systems in use to determine whether they will pose a problem.

Don't assume that simply because a program isn't old that it will work. Our accounting program had been in use since 1992, so it seemed relatively new. If you are using custom software, you've got to be particularly careful.

Second, undertake a technical assessment. Check out whether your hardware — including computers, cash registers, point of sale terminals, debit card machines or other technologies — is Y2K compliant. This can be done in the case of computers with a simple test or by using specific software programs. The details can usually be obtained on the Web site of the manufacturer or vendor that sells the product.

The problem may be particular severe if you have hardware with embedded-chip systems, such as GPS receivers or other equipment that might contain a computer chip.

Third, find out whether any business partners may be adversely affected in a way that will cause you problems. Think about those with whom you do business — customers, suppliers and others. Are you reliant on any of their computer systems to a degree that if they have Y2K problems, it will hurt your business. Go so far as to contact individual companies to determine whether they are fully prepared.

Fourth, consider your own legal liability. There is convincing evidence, gleaned from recent media reports, that we are about to see a feeding frenzy of lawyers destined to become rich through litigation related to the Y2K issue.

Imagine that something goes wrong with your technology and causes a problem for someone else. You may be considered negligent for ignoring the Y2K issue, and have some type of liability.

The Internet is emerging as the entrepreneur's best friend in dealing with Y2K. You can quickly find software to assess the readiness of your computers. In addition, most software vendors have detailed Y2K information pages that will help you determine how your computer programs might be affected.

The Internet is a gold mine for general knowledge about how Y2K affects small business. A good starting place is IBM Canada Ltd.'s small business division (**www.can.ibm.com/smallbusiness/year2000/index.htm**), where you can find a number of useful links and documents in the resources section.

Similarly, you can find useful Year 2000 overviews on the sites of major Canadian banks, technology companies, the Industry Canada Strategis site (**strategis.ic.gc.ca**) and elsewhere.

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